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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the unique development of media histories among developing peoples as compared to the western world's media development sequence from orality to literacy, print, film, and electronics. The fallacy of unilineal cultural evolution is presented, reviewed in terms of how it persists in current theories of media history, and then reconsidered from the standpoint of an Australian aboriginal (Warlpiri) society which does not write in any familiar way. A detailed analysis of Warlpiri graphics as a medium and the reasons for the resistance to print-based literacy in this culture are presented. In addition, the paper offers an analysis of the popularity and influences of modern day video and television among/on these aborigines, especially in terms of video viewing and production. A concluding statement suggests that: (1) Warlpiri aborigines have perhaps discovered some comfortable analogies between their experience of video production and viewing and their own traditional graphic system; (2) this new inscription process is proving more accessible and perhaps less culturally subversive to people in those remaining enclaves of oral tradition; and (3) it is likely that Warlpiri people will develop greater sophistication in European genres and the interpretation of imported narrative fiction which will bring them closer to European readings. (18 references). (CGD)

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ABORIGINAL MEDIA HISTORY:

AN INVERTED SEQUENCE

by Eric Michaels

Paper presented to

the 1986

International Television Studies Conference

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Isolated Aboriginal Australians in the Central Desert region, where traditional language and culture have survived a traumatic hundred years contact period, began to view Hollywood videotapes three years ago and are now beginning to receive television from the new national satellite, AUSSAT. This situation raises many questions for humanistic research, including questions about the ability of the traditional culture to survive this new electronic invasion. I spent three years living with Warlpiri Aborigines of the Yuendumu Community undergoing this imposed transition, partly engaged in applied research and development leading to the birth of an indigenous community television station which challenged government policy and licencing. In the process, I noted what many other field-workers in non-literate, third world and indigenous enclaves are recognising: that electronic media have proved remarkably attractive and accesible to such people where often, print and literacy have not.

We are used to selling literacy as a pro-social, pro-development medium. We are used to denigrating video and television as anti-social and repressive. In this paper I want to examine these biases and their sources in an effort to see if our thinking on these matters can't be brought more in line with indigenous people's own capabilities and preferences so as to lead to a perspective which might prove more helpful and less protectionist.

This is of theoretical interest as well, because we have come to regard the Western World's media development sequence as somehow natural: from orality to literacy, print, film and now electronics. But Aborigines, and other developing peoples do not conform to this sequence, and produce some very different media histories. For philosophers and historians such as Ong, Innes or even Levi-Strauss who posit special equivalencies between oral and electronic society, these ethnographic cases ought to prove especially revealing.

The Fallacy of Unilineal Evolution of Culture.

Despite our best efforts, anthropologists have been unable to undo the racist damage of the unilineal theory of cultural evolution developed by our discipline's founding fathers. The Victorian passion to classify encouraged Tylor and Morgan, for example, to borrow from Darwinian biology a vulgar theory of evolution and apply it to the very different problem of cultural variation. This produced the idea that people too unlike the Victorian English represented less evolved stages in a single great chain of culture.

This thinking was then used to justify both a dismissal of the value of non-western cultures and the evangelical urge to civilise heathens and savages. The reductio ad absurdum of the fallacy was realised by the 1940's in Nazi cosmology. By then, anthropology had well and truly repudiated the theory of unilinealism, and produced evidence of the authenticity and distinct-

ness of cultural types. The theory of cultural relativism which replaced unilinealism now seems naive, but its basic tenet that cultures do not arise in a single historical sequence remains an established canon of anthropological thought. This revision has not been conveyed to the popular mind, however, or even much to other disciplines. (The problem is a bit like Lamarckism in biology. Despite the evidence, and the theoretical incompatability with accepted theory, the possibility of inheritence of acquired traits persists, even in biology textbooks which sometimes talk as though the giraffe got its long neck from stretching for leaves; certainly most everybody else talks this way.)

Evidence of the persistence of unilinealism is everywhere, from popular thinking about "primitives" (aided and abetted by the etymology of the very word) to third-world development agendas, to a remarkable variety of humanist scholarship. It matters not whether the value loading is Rousseauian romanticism or native advancement or simple garden variety racialism. The point is that very few people believe what anthropology teaches: that indegenous, small-scale traditional societies are not earlier (or degenerate) versions of our own. They are rather differing solutions to historical circumstances and environmental particulars which testify to the breadth of human intellectual creativity and its capacity for symbolisation.

In the case of Aboriginal Australians, it may be said that comparative isolation from the network of world cultures for perhaps 40,000 years encourgaed a continuous cultural sequence such as is to be found nowhere else. By contrast, modern European

culture is assumed to have recent points of disjuncture (the Industrial Revolution; the World Wars; the electronic revolution) so that certain of our own cultural forms may prove only a few generations old. If Aborigines have had 40,000 years to elaborate a continuous cultural tradition, certainly there must be a respects in which this degree of elaboration produces cultural results of extraordinary value. We can hardly justify a claim that Europeans proved more sophisticated than the Aborigines, unless we take the technology and will to subjugate as privileged measures of human values.

Unilinealism surely persists in our theories of media history. The idea that media are either signals or engines of cultural sequence is familiar at least since Innes and McLuhan. Both,in accounting for European media, simplify to a unilineal historical causality for the West. And both are guilty of generalising from here to some universal evolutionary sequence using "primitive" societies in curious and usually uninformed ways to illustrate their points. But the fault cannot be attributed to these scholars alone. The very most common terms we use to distinguish our civilisation from others -- "historical from pre-historical" -- are semantically loaded with precisely the same ammunition, and refer to writing as the pivotal event in this presumed sequence. It seems telling that when we searched for a new, non-pejorative term to describe the distinction which would contain contemporary non-writing cultures, as well as ancient ones in a class contrastive to our own, "literate and pre-literate" gained the widest currency. Attempts to unbias the

matter by subsituting "non-literate" never really caught on. And the descriptor "oral", itself mostly unexamined, became confused with "tribal," a word whose technical meaning is inappropriate for many of the groups so classified.

All these terms underscore western society's perhaps judeo-derived cultural emphasis on our own writing skills, and reveal our opinion that people who can't write are backward. This very deeply rooted conceptualisation is now being challenged as we move from writing to electronic coding as the central symbolising system of our age. McLuhan looked for precedents and claimed that this new age would put us more in common with "pre-literate, tribal" societies. And whether the public read McLuhan or not, it began to panic, aware that something was happening to our relianace on reading. Illiteracy rates appeared to be rising among our own young. The very fabric of culture and society was being sundered and we risked degenerating into some new form of savagery.

One problem with this literate myopia has been that we haven't paid much attention to what other people do instead of writing, and how information is processed, stored, transmitted, shared or received in its absence. This paper offers a reconsideration of the sequence of media history in a society which doesn't write, or at least has been believed not to.

Aboriginal Australian Media

Contemporary Aboriginal Australians have generally resisted several generations of concerted literacy teaching, first from Bible toting missionaries and then from an "enlightened" school

system. Wherever their traditional law, language and culture are viable in Australia, literacy rates remain well below twenty-five per cent, even when bilingual and special education services have been available. I believe this implies that there is something essential to cultural maintenance associated with *not* writing, which is yet to be understood. But in this same population, videorecorders have appeared in the last few years, and during my three years of fieldwork I was able to observe the rapid adoption of electronic media by people who rejected print. This provides us with the intriguing, but perhaps no longer so unusual situation of a peoples moving rapidly from "oral" to electronic society, but bypassing print literacy. Attention to the particulars of both the traditional system and the accommodation to the imposed one offers insights into the limitations of our unexamined theories of unilineal media evolution.

Traditional Aboriginal society did not employ, and presumably did not discover, alphabetic writing. It is probably accurate to classify this culture as "oral," and elsewhere, I have discussed at some length some of the nature and consequences of this central feature of the society. (Michaels, 1985) Yet Aborigines were not without resources for codifying experience and inscribing it in various media.

The Warlpiri people of the Yuendumu Community with whom I worked are noted particularly for a rich graphic design tradition described to us at length by Nancy Munn. (1971; 1973) This design system extends throughout the Central region of Australia and across most of the western desert, although symbols and tech-

niques vary in particulars, from community to community. It appears that the northern coastal communities employed an appreciably different design system, which may correspond partly with the classification of many groups in this area as comprising a language family distinct from most of the rest of the continent. Graphic systems in the Southeast quadrant are apparently defunct, along with most of the languages, so that rock art and artefacts contain suggestive clues but probably are insufficient for reconstructing the system as a whole, compared to the opportuinity to observe the system in full use, as among the Warlpiri. Thus, it will be difficult to generalise accurately from the Warlpiri example, but I suspect that the basic graphic system described for them will prove to apply fairly widely to many Aboriginal societies in general outline.

Warlpiri Graphics: a Traditional Medium

Warlpiri design is a form of inscription which operates quite differently from more familar writings. It neither provides phonological symbols which combine to record speech (alphabets), or pictorial glyphs which denote specified objects or ideas (picto/ideographs). If anything, it poses a sort of mediation between the two. It does provide pictographic symbols which are recombined to express ideas and things, but unlike Oriental ideographic writing, and more like alphabets, it abstracts elements so combined and reduces them to comparatively few. Attempts to provide lexicons which associate the symbols with discrete words, or even broad semantic domains, prove unsuccessful and ultimately misleading, as Munn seems to have discovered.

The system relies on a fairly discrete, but polysemous inventory of graphic symbols: circles, dots, lines, semi-circles (additional, representational depictions of a specific tree leaf or animal body can be included -- attempts by reviewers such as Dunbinskas and Traweek [1984] to treat Munn's corpus as complete and rule-governed are incorrect). These are combined in groundpaintings (made of soils, ochers, feathers, flowers), body decoration (ochres, pipeclay, animal fats), utilitarian objects and weapons, and special ceremonial objects (boards, stones, sticks) as well as being painted and carved on caves and rock faces. In recent years, traditional designs have been translated to acrylics and applied to canvas, objects, and murals, and women have developed a batik technique. Most of my experience of Warlpiri graphics comes from assisting in the formative stages of this transition to modern media for sale to contemporary art markets.

The distinctive features of Warlpiri graphics are many; I want to consider some of these which contrast it to contemporary writing systems. This is not the approach taken by Munn, or more recently by her critics. The grammatical structures and social-/psychological functions of the design system for the Warlpiri which is discussed by these authors is accepted here as evidence of the richness of that system which can support various interpretations. Instead, I want to ask, as Havelock (1982) might, "What kind of writing system is this?" And I will conclude that it is as close to what we call writing (logo/ideographic or alphabetic) as you can get without compromising the authority of

human speakers and interpreters: that is, a writing in the service of orality. Havelock would call Warlpiri graphics solipsistic: they record ideas rather than speech, are evocative rather than denotative, and do not assure a given reading. Unfortunately, such systems do not attract his attention except to remark that others have been most careless in their classification and attentions to such systems, a point well taken.

Some differences between Warlpiri graphics and other writing systems are immediately, visibly apparent. Both western alphabets and pictographic writing systems arrange symbols in linear sequence and are biased towards surfaces, such as scrolls and book pages, which frame and support the cumulative string so produced. For Warlpiri, the relationship between the symbol and the surface is more creative. The painter/writer arranges the designs in a manner that relates them to the shape of the object, body or ground contour on which they are applied. Perhaps this is why Warlpiri graphics get reviewed as art, not writing. But this attention to the inscription surface is appropriate because the contents which are typically inscribed are "Dreaming" stories which are the myths accounting for the land, its objects and people. This is like "bricolage" in Levi-Strauss's (1966) sense, where components enlisted in the service of an abstract recombinative system still retain their associations with their origins. Warlpiri graphics might be called a "meta-bricolage" because the inscribing media, the messages, and the surfaces to be inscribed are all meaningful briccleur elements of a dynamic intertextuality.

Another way to describe these graphic constructions is as maps. As stories of the landscape they are also images of that landscape. To this extent, spatial relationships of the symbols are constrained by a spatial and topographical system which the artist must respect. For a painting to be deemed a "proper law one", its elements must be in a correct proxemic arrangement. Scale and relationship are conventional but obviously in terms quite distinct from western linear writing.

The adage "the map is not the territory" may not prove accurate for the Warlpiri. Where the land, a rockface or even a body is embellished, the embellishment sometimes may be an articulation of actual or perceived features of the thing itself. This is one area in which the transition to portable painted surfaces like canvas took some working out. Early acrylic paintings by traditional artists, for example, do not reduce large designs in scale to smaller surfaces. To achieve complexity in a painting, very large canvasses had to be provided. Small canvasses tended to depict what proved to be only small sections of large design complexes, like a single window in a computer spreadsheet. Only after some time and experience is an artist likely to scale down "large" designs to smaller, marketable surfaces.

Because the "icon," the inscription medium and the surface, are all meaningful semiotic elements to be considered in the reading of Warlpiri graphics, it begins to appear that the system contains too many functioning semiotic levels to achieve either the denotation of pictographs, or the abstract creativity of alphabets. But there are more levels than this. Eight are listed by Dubinskas and Traweek (p.23). (The additional ones are

sociolinguistic matters of the performance event in which the design is produced and used.) We have now a problem like the one Bateson (1972) considers exemplified by the croquet game in Alice in Wonderland. If the balls, the wickets and the mallets are all independently motivated moving elements, the game is too unpredictable to play. It is therefore an organic system, not a mechanical one, he concludes. Writing, if it is to accomplish the functions it achieves in the western world, must be a mechanical system, rule bound and predictable. Reading must become automatic, transparent, "the purely passive instrument of the spoken word." (Havelock, p. 55) The system must detach itself from its human author and operate more or less equivalently for all literate users. This is precisely what Warlpiri graphics does not attempt. Warlpiri designs remain attached to their authors, as their property, and to paint another's design may be regarded as theft of a particularly onerous kind.

To call the owners of these designs their authors is not precisely correct, however. Warlpiri cosmology is staunchly conservative. It insists that truth pre-exists human apprehension. The creation and recreation of the world is an established eternal process; the stories, songs, dances and designs which contain and explain these truths are likewise unchanging. What one paints or sings or dances is what your fathers and mothers and their fathers and mothers painted, danced and sang before you (although one may acquire additional information about these truths through revalation or exchange). Your rights to do the same are determined by your position in an elaborately

structured system of kin, itself handed down along with these expressive arts from the ancestors themselves.

In terms of what we know of cybernetic systems, this is impossible, a prescription for total cultural entropy. To explain how novelty enters the system, so that it can respond to environmental circumstances and remain viable, we have to step outside the explanations the system offers us.

Ethnology takes this vantage point when it notes ways in which the system does respond to change. Hale (1984) has described how pedagogic events may permit creativity. Wild (1975) has discovered ethnomusicological equivalents. Morphy (1983) has described the public display of secret designs. Rose (1985) has documented an historical account of Captain Cook becoming a legend, and I have analysed elsewhere elements of a history transforming to dreaming construction in which videotape has become involved. (Michaels and Kelly, 1984) What we have not so readily pursued is how our own activity in inscribing these in literate print may prove subversive of these traditiona.

It is precisely the point that Warlpiri graphics are a writing system which does not subvert the authority of living people, or permit the identification of historical change as western literacy does. Warlpiri graphics oppose publication and public access. They do this partly by limiting denotation, operating instead as an evocative mnemonic, recalling stories without asserting any authorised text or privileged reading. They also do this by restricting access to both the production and viewing of designs. In the "sand stories" described by Munn, which are women's casual accounting of dreams, daily life and

folktales, the public designs in this ephemeral, shifting medium are mostly illustrative and serve as entertainment and to introduce children to the system. In ritual, sacred and often secret designs are applied to bodies, objects and the ground, and the rules governing the construction and viewing of these designs are highly constrained, and permit less creativity. Most of these designs are obliterated following the ritual performance. Kolig (1981:viii) observes that the secret designs painted on bodies may remain dimly visibe in camp for days aftewards, undecipherable to the uninitiated, but testimony to the existence of secret lore none-the-less. It would seem that the most sacred designs, those inscribed on sacred boards, "Tjuringas", and rock faces are also the most permanent. They are tended, and rock paintings and boards are ritually renewed cyclically. These are the only permanent texts, and their locations are rigorously guarded. For uninitiated or otherwise inappropriate people to view these, even accidentally, is punishable by death. Other than these, Warlpiri graphics are mentally stored, sociologically guarded and emergent only in ceremonial and story-telling performances.

These constraints on ownership and meaning become clear when, in the Yuendumu Artists Association studio, we try to identify paintings in preparation for sales. Usually, people refuse to provide the stories for any paintings but their own, or sometimes for designs owned by their kin group. However, understanding our relative naivete and the economic incentive, sometimes when the painter is out of the community, another senior

man or woman may try to provide a story for the painting. Remarkably, they sometimes fail, and more often come up with a reading which proves at variance with the "correct" version provided later by the painter.

For a full, "correct" version, a male painter will assemble other senior men of his patrimoeity associated with the same or adjacent land as himself, and negotiate the interpretation along with a set of men from the opposite patrimoeity who maintain rights as "witnessess" or caretakers (*"Kurdungurlu"*: see Nash, 1982), but not performers or owners of the story.

Glenn (1963) in an insightful but overlooked note in American Anthropology provides an explanation. Comparing Munn's early reports of Warlpiri Iconography to "State Department Graphics," he suggests that Warlpiri symbols seem much like the unique shorthand that translators and state department staff take of speeches during top level meetings. These provide a means of recall of speech texts to be transcribed shortly after the event and prove quite accurate. But despite great similarities in the symbols used, rarely could a reporter reconstruct a speech from another's notes. Even the author might have difficulty as time elapsed. The difference between these ideolectic glyphs and Warlpiri symbols is partly in the collectivitity of the Warlpiri system, where shared meanings are emergent in the interpretive negotiations that occur in graphic display events very much more than in the text itself.

Munn described these iconographs as devices for mediating symbolically between essential dualities expressed in Warlpiri cosmology, including subject/object, individual/collectivity, and

especially dreaming time/present time. In the last instance, my analysis suggests there is more than a structuralist abstraction operating here: this writing system functionally resolves a conservative ideology, where things are always the same with the contradictory lived evidence of a changing world. If this proves true, then the changes imposed on Aborigines since European invasion must present the most fundamental challenge to this system, and we begin to suspect that the dismal literacy rates represent more than just a failure of effort or will on the part of teachers or students. The failure of literacy might be seen as a resistence as well, not to change, but to a threat to the culture's capacity to manage change.

Certainly, many senior people feel this way. They complain about the school and about writing. They say it makes the kids "cheeky," so they don't listen to their elders. Especially interesting is the attitude of the middle-aged people who succeeded at the school in the 1950's-60's, before the bilingual programme was established. They say that the bilingual programme is holding up the kids, wasting their time with Warlpiri when they should be learning English, presumably as they did, usually by rote. (This contradicts all of the evaluation and testing evidence colected at Yuendumu which demonstrates that English is being learned better and more quickly in the bi-lingual programme.) Because this generation now operates in a uniquely powerful role in the commuity as spokemen and leaders of the council and other European inspired institutions (and thereby commands and channels substantial resources) they have been capable of engineering a

considerable political challenge to bi-lingual education. The fact is, they themselves usally cannot read Warlpiri. These community leaders often are themselves in an anomalous cultural situation, and probably take the brunt of "civilisation" -- ennui, alcoholism, curruption -- harder than anyone else. But from a distance, what we observe is a classical Aboriginal situation: generations in competition with each other. What is new is that the resource which the society afforded the most senior people to control, intellectual property in the form of dreaming law, is now subverted by the intellectual property accessible to younger people, through the medium of literacy.

TV and video

In the last few years, another medium of inscribing and accessing information has entered Warlpiri life: video and television. Within a year of the first VCR coming to Yuendumu (and sufficient tape rental services opening in Alice Springs to support these) videotape penetration was effectively total in the community. Only nine VCR's were reported in Aboriginal camps in 1983, for a population of 900, but these meant that essentialy every extended family had access to at least one machine and could view in appropriate groupings, respecting avoidance restrictions and other traditional constraints on congregating. (When similar contents were screened as films at the school or church beginning twenty-five years earlier, mass viewing required violations of traditional avoidance and association rules which produced considerable stress and often ended in chaos or fighting which hardly encouraged the acquisition of cinema literacy.)

My Aboriginal associate and I surveyed the situation (Michaels and Granites, 1984) and discovered, among other things, that it was costing at least $5,000 annually to maintain a video here, exceeding annual per capita income. The difficulties of equipment purchase, maintenance, and programme supply in desert camps three hundred kilometers (along a mostly dirt road) from the nearest repair or tape rental shop proved enormous. Indeed, we found communities without electricity where ingenious generator installations were rigged up for the first time, not for lights or heat, but to play video. By the summer of 1985, the glow of the cathode ray tube had replaced the glow of the campfire in many, many remote Aboriginal settlements. There could be no question of motivation. Only rifles and 4-wheel drive Toyotas had achieved such acceptence of all of the introduced Western technologies.

The situation was reported with predictable alarm by the press, but also by Aborigines themselves (noting no contradiction in the fact that many of the most articulate objectors were themselves video watchers/owners). People were predicting culturecide and claimed that Aborigines appeared helpless to resist this new invasion. The analogy to alcohol was quickly made, and the received wisdom was that the electronic damage was already done, the pristine culture ruined, etc. These "facts" were used with great ingenuity to support a wide and contradictory array of agendas, schemes and proposals, none, as far as I could tell, having much to do with the actual situation.

During this time I was watching Aborigines view video and watching them make video. It became quite clear that here was a situation where the bankruptcy of the "effects" fallacy was demonstrated. From my observations, a very different "uses and gratifications" picture emerged than the passive victimisation of Aboriginal audiences suggested by the alarmists.

One kind of evidence was available by asking my associates what any given videotape "was about," in the most usual, conversational way. This produced what were to me, quite extraordinary readings of Hollywood programmes I thought I was already familiar with. Additional evidence came from school children and creative writing exercises. Another kind of evidence came from assisting in the production of indigenous Warlpiri video programmes along the lines of Worth and Adair's (1972) studies of Navajo film-making and analysing both production style and product (Michaels and Kelly, 1985). The evidence from these two sources proved complementary, and permitted the beginnings of a theory of Aboriginal interpetation of imported television. Here, I will summarise some of the elements of this theory, which I have treated more fully elsewhere. (Michaels, 1985a)

The most suggestive finding was that Aboriginal people were unfamiliar with the conventions, genres and epistemology of Western narrative fiction. They were unable to evaluate the truth value of Hollywood cinema, to distinguish, for example, documentary from romance. This may be because all Warlpiri stories are true, and the inscription and interpretation processes which assure their preservation also insure their truthfulness (or at least engineer a consensus on what is true at each recreation,

which amounts to the same thing). Thus, I was observing the impact of fiction on Aborigines much more than the impact of television per se.

Comparisons between Warlpiri story form and imported video fictions demonstrated that in many instances, content (what is supplied in the narrative) and context (what must be assumed) are so different from one system to the other that they might be said to be reversed. For example, Warlpiri narrative will provide detailed kinship relationships between all characters as well as establishing a kinship domain for each. When Hollywood videos fail to say where Rocky's grandmother is, or who's taking care of his sister-in-law, Warlpiri viewers discuss the matter and need to fill in the missing content. By contrast, personal motivation is unusual in Aboriginal story; characters do things because the class (kin, animal, plant) of which they are a member is known to behave this way. This produces interesting indigenous theories, for example, of national character to explain behavior in "Midnight Express," or the "A-Team." But equally interesting, it tends to ignore narrative exposition and character development focusing instead on dramatic action (as Aboriginal stories themselves do).

Violence, for instance, described by Gerbner as TV's cheap industrial ingredient overlayed on narratives mainly to bring viewer's attention to the screen for ultimately commercial purposes, is for Aboriginal viewers the core of the story. The motivation and character exposition which the European viewer is expected to know to explain why someone was mugged, or robbed or

blown up is missing. It is more likely in Aboriginal accounts to be supplied by what we would consider supernatural reasons, consistent with the reasons misfortunes befall people in Aboriginal cosmology.

These brief examples should make it clear that it will be very difficult to predict the effects of particular television contents on traditional Aboriginal audiences without a well-developed theory of interpretation. To advance a theory of interpretation, it may be helpful to consider now what kind of writing system is television which makes it so accessible and attractive to these people whose traditional preference was for writing systems of the sort explained above? An analysis of the videotapes the Warlpiri made themselves provides some insight.

Warlpiri videotape is at first disappointing to the European observer. It seems unbearably slow, involving long landscape pans and still takes that seem semantically empty. Much of what appears on screen, for better or worse, might easily be attributed to naive filmaking. Finally, the entire corpus of 300+ hours of tape shot at Yuendumu is all documentary "Direct Cinema." The only exceptions, when events were constructed and people performed expressly for the camera, were the result of my intervention for experimental purposes.

Yet Warlpiri audiences view these tapes with great attention and emotion, often repeatedly, beyond what could be expected from a fascination with "home movies". If this is attributable to novelty, it has yet to wear off in three years I've been involved. In fact, the limits to some tape's lifespan are the limits of the lifespan of the characters. A mortuary rule

prohibiting the mention of the names of dead people now applies as well to their recorded images, which means that when a tape contains pictures of the deceased, that tape is no longer shown.

Producers and viewers will describe the tape, its purposes and meanings in ways not immediately apparent from the recorded images themselves. For example, proper videotape production for a particular story may require the presence of several families including many people. But not only do most of these people not appear on the tape, but a proportion of them (related to the on-screen "owner" of the story through the mother's patrilineage) must not appear on screen. They may, however, operate the camera. This is consistent with equivalent rules in ceremonial performance. But what attracts our attention is that everybody seems to know how that tape was made, and whether these rules were observed, and therefore if the tape is a "proper" and "true" story, without any apparent evidence on the tape itself. Similarly, what are to the European observer semantically empty landscape pans are explained by Aboriginal producers and viewers as full of meaning. The camera in fact traces tracks and locations where ancestors, spirits or historical characters travelled. The apparently empty shot is quite full of life and history to the Aboriginal eye. The electronic inscription process may be said to be operating for the Warlpiri in a way not unlike their graphic system, providing nmemonic, evocative symbols amenable to interpretation and historical accuracy when viewed in the proper social and cultural context.

Video viewing is a very active interpretive social event, particularly in groups made possible by private ownership of VCR's. In fact, ownership of VCR's is not quite private in the European sense, and our early survey determined that these machines were corporate purchases and circulated along traditional exchange/obligation routes usually within families. This means that viewing groups, as described above, are appropriate assemblages of kin, and provide a suitable setting for events of social interpretation, not unlike what was described for Warlpiri artists explaining their paintings. One interesting difference between groups viewing Warlpiri productions and those viewing European ones is the placement of the elders. With the former, elders sit towards the front, turned half around to interpret to the younger people. With Hollywood videos, the children sit in front, often interpreting and explaining to their elders.

Conclusions

Warlpiri Aborigines have perhaps discovered some comfortable analogies between their experience of video production and viewing and their own traditional graphic system. For Warlpiri viewers, Hollywood videos do not prove to be complete, authoritative texts. Rather, they are very partial accounts which require a good deal of interpretive activity on the part of viewers to supply contents as well as contexts which make these narratives meaningful. When home video made it possible for Warlpiri to control the place and membership of viewing groups,

it became possible to assemble the small, interpretive communities which are associated with other performances in which stories are told and their associated graphics displayed. At this point, video viewing became a most popular and pursuasive camp activity.

By contrast, reading and literature did not. While this article has not expanded a theory of literacy except by contrast to Warlpiri graphics, an historical point is worth making. Currrent literary criticism now questions the notion that there are correct or even priviledged readings of literary texts; reader centred criticism claims that readers will make diverse interpretations. But the Warlpiri were introduced to literature through that most privileged of texts, the Christian Bible, by missionaries who took the Calvinist position that every word therein had one and only one "common sense" meaning. Thus, literature may well be associated by Aborigines with a dogmatism, a certitude, a sense of revealed and inscribed truth which would prove subversive of their own dreaming history and law. That history and law required a different mode of writing to maintain the continuity of its authority.

The evidence from Warlpiri graphics and Warlpiri video prove useful to the rexamination of the "oral/electronic" analogy proposed my media historians. If would be important in this rexamination to note first that some "oral" societies, for example the Warlpiri, do have writing of a particular sort: a writing subservient to, and in the service of, oral performance and living authorities. The writings which became the source of western literacy are distinguished functionally from "oral

writing" in that they subverted and replaced orality as the integrating mode of symbolisation for society.

We may now question whether written texts are in fact so authoritative as we have been used to considering them. But we raise this question at a time when another inscription system competes for centrality in our imformation processing and imaginative symbolising: electronics. It seems particularly interesting that this new inscription process is proving more accessible, and perhaps less culturally subversive, to people in those remaining enclaves of oral tradition. The most useful first question to ask may be, "What about their writing systems is like electronic writing," rather than "How is their society like ours."

At least one result of this kind of inquiry is to suggest some useful considerations for dealing with commercial video narratives and emergent television genres. Although historically, the sources for plot and character are found in earlier novel and literary forms, Warlpiri viewers, and perhaps now many others, put video fictions to quite different uses and make quite different sense of them. What Warlpiri viewers require is a good deal of visual and visceral action, a rich familial and kinship context and a means of combining these into a classificatory universe whose truth is partly in the structures they can produce with these elements and partly in the opportunities the texts provide for negotiation and social discourse. As Western television develops its own conventions, themes and genres, reaching out for the vastest, pan-cultural (or a-cultural) mass

audiences, it is clearly offering more of these kinds of materials to its viewers. To the horror of literate-biased critics, it is stripping away cultural denotation, cultural specific motivations, psychologies and their place in character development. Its commitment to "inscribed truth" is gone. Indeed, we might seem to be realising Levi-Strauss's prophecy:

> ...this universe made up of meanings no longer appears to us as a retrospective witness of a time when: '...le ciel sur la terre Marchait et respirait dans un peuple de dieux,' and which the poet evokes only for the purpose to ask whether it is to be regretted. This time is now restored to us, thanks to the discovery of a universe of information where the laws of savage thought reign once more: 'heaven' too, 'walking on earth' among a population of transmitters and recivers whose mesaages, while in transmission, constitute objects of the physical world and can be grasped from without and from within. (1966:267)

That video now proves acceptable and accessible in a way that alphabetic literature did not could prove to be partly a transitional feature of Aborigine's recent encounter with the medium. Warlpiri-produced video may preserve these features, if its unique properties are recognised and encouraged (a difficult proposition when overzealous "professional" trainers intercede, and media institutions force competition between indigenous and imported programmes). But it is likely that Warlpiri people will develop greater sophistication in European genres and the interpretation of imported narrative fiction which will bring them closer to European readings. In so doing, it may be that the "gaps" I have identified will fill up, and the medium will become more denotative and less evocative, and finally, less Warlpiri.

It could prove promising that the most popular genres appear to be action/adventure, soapies, musicals and slapstick. Whatever our educated palettes may think of these forms, they have advantages in the context of this analysis. As the least character motivated, most formulaic fictions, they may encourage active interpretation and cross-culturally varied readings. The trend in popular TV and international video marketing continues to be in favor of those entertainments in which universal familial relationships are highlighted, action is dominant and culture specific references are either minimal or unecessary for the viewer's enjoyment. From this perspective, it would seem difficult to see in the introduction of imported video and television programmes the destruction of Aboriginal culture. Such a claim can only be made in ignorance of the strong traditions and preferences in graphics, the selectivity of media and contents and the strength of Warlpiri interpretation.

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